

**OBITUARY**  
**TOM SPENCE (1920-1985)**



Tom Spence photographed in August 1967 with his pet cheetah Puss Puss shortly after his arrival from Scotland to take up the position of superintendent of the South Perth zoo. (Photograph reproduced with kind permission of W.A. Newspapers Ltd., Perth).

The ranks of local naturalists were sadly depleted when one of its most colourful personalities, Tom Spence, late director of the Perth Zoo, died on April 2. He survived a serious operation on bowel cancer in June 1983 but succumbed to cancer of the liver, which supervened. He was made aware of his likely early death, but bore the news with remarkable fortitude, calmly ordering his affairs and disposing of his treasured possessions to friends and institutions. He was a Scotsman, born at Newburgh, in Fife, on June 7, 1920 and had no relatives in Western Australia. Two married sisters survive him, one living in Fife, the other in England.

Tom was educated at the famous George Heriot School in Edinburgh, founded in 1628, and trained in veterinary science at the Royal Dick Veterinary College in that City, where he took an honours degree. He then studied entomology and zoology at the University of London.

He took on a research post with the Ministry of Agriculture at Weybridge, Surrey and as a reward for his work was sent on a year's study tour to Australia in 1950, based at the McMaster Laboratory of the CSIRO in Sydney and engaged in blowfly research. But all his life he was passionately interested in animals and had maintained a private zoo at his home in Dunbog. In Australia he spent most of his spare time in the field primarily studying the Anserifomes and had seen in the wild all the species known in Australia, except the Blue-billed Duck.

I first met him in March 1951, when he joined my mutton-bird team at Fisher Island in Bass Strait. Our other companion at the time was Professor Allen Keast and we visited a number of outlying islands including Chappell and Babel, where we learned to admire the several qualities of the exuberant Tom. From Fisher Island he took with him to Sydney a box-full of Fairy Penguins which went off to the Edinburgh Zoo. They all survived and were the first of the species to be seen there. On his return to Scotland on the P. & O. Liner *Strathaird* in June that year he called at Fremantle and Cleve Jenkins and I took him on a local tour when he was able to see the long sought for Blue-billed Duck at Butler's Swamp.

When my wife and I made an overseas tour in 1955 we saw a lot of Tom. We had dinner with him on October 6 at a Greek restaurant in Soho, which he used to patronise when a student at South Kensington. It was a pleasant reunion before a week's stay later in the month, with him and his mother at his farm in Dunbog. At this large comfortable double-storey farmhouse, of greystone, we became acquainted with his house pet, Puss Puss the cheetah. Tom had

become interested in lories and had a beautiful pair of black *Chalcopsitta ater* from New Guinea. He had a variety of other animals too, Crested Pigeons, shelduck and Bennett's Wallabies. The kitchen and stairway were lined with bird cages. No wonder Mrs. Spence was frantic with the avian intrusion and Tom was providing her with a cottage on the banks of the nearby Tay. Tom took us to neighbouring places of interest, St. Andrews and the fringes of the Highlands. We saw Loch Tummel and the cloud-capped peak of Schichallion, in central Perthshire.

I stayed with Tom again for a few days in the following March. Gertrude and I were fellow passengers with Tom in July 1966 on the cruise ship *Devonia* chartered by the International Ornithological Congress for a cruise around the Scottish islands. Later that year I met Tom again in London where he arrived on September 1 to be interviewed for the post of Superintendent of the Perth Zoo. After the interview he and I with one of the interviewers, Mr. John Yealland of the Regent's Park Zoo, had dinner together at the pleasant Sherlock Holmes pub off Northampton Avenue. Tom was happy at the interview and told me that if he obtained the post he would sell his Fife properties but would bring with him his antique furniture and similar possessions "as they are a part of him." I spent another week with Tom at Dunbog, where I admired his Stanley Cranes and the excessively rare White-naped Cranes, of which less than 200 individuals then probably existed. Tom went with me on a chase of the antique shops, after horse brasses and Perth-marked antique silver. He gave me a slab containing a fossil fish from the famous Green River shales of Wyoming, U.S.A., of Eocene age.

Tom obtained the appointment out of 46 applicants for the post. Soon after it was announced I ran into John Berry (retired Director for Scotland of the Nature Conservancy) at the British Museum. He said Western Australia had got a very good man and regretted his loss to Scotland. His parting shaft at me was: "Damn you for taking him away from us." John Berry was later instrumental in having Tom being made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (which operates the Edinburgh Zoo).

Tom arrived at Fremantle on the M.V. *Illyric* on January 18, 1967. He was the sole passenger, but was accompanied by a whole suite of animals, his two cheetahs, gibbons and a consignment of animals for the Melbourne Zoo from the London Zoo. This was a remarkable achievement in view of the vexatious administrative obstacles which had been placed in his way. But as he wrote to me earlier: "It is unlikely, so the authorities say, that I'll be allowed to have the cheetahs with me but they don't know Tom Spence when he sets his mind to a thing. Even if I have to go and beard the Chairman of the Shipping Co. in his den I'll do it if it means I can have my way." He succeeded, as he did later when the Suez Canal authorities raised difficulties about the passage of the animals through the Canal. As he wrote after passing through the Canal: "So far the animals have travelled very well indeed and I have had the male cheetah up on the bridge deck which involves bringing him up three very steep flights of 'ladders' and taking him down which is even more difficult. He enjoys it and spends an hour each morning in the smoke room while we have coffee. Very few of the crew are still afraid of him."

Tom's career at the Zoo was triumphant. He was the first professionally trained Director since the founder of the Zoo in 1898. Colonel E.A. Le Souef laid out the magnificent grounds in South Perth, aided by the competent gardener, the late Henry Steedman.

Among Tom's achievements were the walk-through aviary, the nocturnal house, the raptor collection, the primate collection (particularly his skill with the Orang-Utangs).

He threw his energies enthusiastically into local natural history activities. Memorable are the Christmas gatherings he organised at his Zoo residence, when his culinary skills provided outstanding dinners. He introduced the practice of the Scottish Ornithologists' Association in including banquets into the annual field gatherings of the R.A.O.U.

At the Zoo he was no sedentary office-holder, but made frequent and extensive field trips with other naturalists (cf. W.A. Nat., 14:245). He was a vivid letter-writer and often illustrated his letters with competently executed sketches of birds he might have been referring to.

—D.L.S.